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On Having Been Gladly Jabbed in the Eyes

It's Richard Meltzer's world, we just decipher it

BY DAVE SHULMAN

SINCE "OBSESSION" BECAME A COLOGNE, its relatives — once a fine fine lot of words — have lost their credibility. I can't use them anymore without stinking up the place and detracting from my already dubious ability to make sense. But since I'm entirely interested in communicating, let's swap the term "obsessed with" with the term "entirely interested in."

Some people are entirely interested in washing their hands 60 times a day and touching each knob on the stove ("Off! Off! Off off off!") before leaving the house. Some people are entirely interested in Jesus, some in Quentin Tarantino.

Richard Meltzer, however, is entirely interested in every goopy molecule on the planet, with a preference for sexmolecules and deathmolecules: entirely interested in being someone entirely interested. Author of close to 7,000 titles (including *Gulcher* and *L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas*), founder of contemporary rock criticism (and no hack at jazz, either), Renaissance man, creator of four-digit annual incomes — God knows how much he knows; all things in the universe, at least: "But I still haven't told you 'bout a pencil I neither love nor loathe and either use or peruse that is either mine or someone else's; a ride I'm either taking or giving to a place I'm unsure I or my driver or passenger is all that committed to going or being . . ."

Like most novels, Meltzer's *The Night (Alone)* opens with explicit instructions on how to kill the author. These recommendations remain largely unchanged from Meltzer's original, untitled, 1982-ish poem, with the following exceptions: instead of drowning him in cement, use Elmer's glue; instead of packing his head in a 4-by-4 cube of concrete with two airholes and dropping him from a 727 into Lake Superior, make it a 707 and aim for Huron.

Once we've killed Meltzer, we're warmly welcomed inside *The Night (Alone)* to visit his boundless flailings between sportfucking, deathdreams, being the most polite person in the history of the universe and offending the offendable with the unadulterated honesty they secretly crave: "Fuck me; read me; come and git it."

An everuncoiling mainspring, *The Night (Alone)* ravages paragraphs like a Tasmanian devil on speed, clawing and biting away at the formality of verbal architecture at will; perfectly unbalanced, laser-sharp hypersanity unleashed on petrified tradition. "(Between). So (wife) teed-off (and) was (some) she (half) that (starving) hubby (putz) took (he) her (chose) side (wife —) f'r (fine.) keeps (I'll): neveragain (live.)." Chapters are visually invaded by their own unwieldy conclusions — a line of type escapes from the end to burrow italicly through the beginning and middle; evil paragraph marks infiltrate otherwise pristine blitherings, forcing emotional typesetting in real time; torrents of parentheses attack everything in sight, leaving us sheepishly piecing together the carrion. (Don't expect any linear resolution or inspiring character developments; if you require these things, we have a lovely assortment of 900 numbers at the back of the paper.)

Few people in the world can metabolize as much of their culture as Meltzer can, so expect plenty of shit to come out. In fact, beg for it. Anyone who swallows as much life as Meltzer and digests it this thoroughly had better pray it doesn't all stay inside — he would drown.

What might first appear as an amazing unedited thoughtstream is instead, upon closer examination (i.e., asking one of Meltzer's friends), the most anal-retentive re-creation of one, a feat requiring a prodigious understanding of melody (linguistics) and rhythm (punctuation) that accurately mirrors the mind's yabberings. Meltzer's virtuosic printvoice is the necessary saxophone, tenor sax cracking solo jokes about sex and death, revealing the most subtle inflections from beneath brash idiomatic gestures; painter Philip Guston's late work comes to mind — sad, bold, desolate, noisy, figurative. A hummingbird's wingbeating blur to remain fixed in place, hovering still.

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In Chapter 4,012, Meltzer recaps "The Story So Far: The twin Life impulses, cunnilingus and urination, versus the twin Death impulses, vaginal intercourse and writing — a never-ending battle — which will win?"

Same one that always wins: feel that frozen nanosecond of pelvic flailing when after you've just thrust into/onto your partner and are now beginning the stroke back out, away, toward self, loneliness, doubt, ever-insufficiency; decision; you hesitate, and wonder: What is the next movement going to be? How much of this is voluntary? What is it about me that isn't about you? It is a ballet of tears of cum as one expression, one liquid gesture.

Or it would have been, if you hadn't stopped and analyzed it to death.

ON MOST NOVELISTS' METAPHYSICAL RÉSUMÉS, you'll find something like:

> **1962–1993 – Dostoyevsky, Inc. *Vice president, Creative Development.*** Developed unique method of revealing universal truths through exhaustively re-created details of poignant imagery. ($350/mo.)

On Meltzer's:

> **9 August 1985, 8:09:21–8:09:22 p.m.** Figured out all things; no time to write down. ($350/yr.)

Now that the medium is more advertisement for the convergence of meticulously encoded messages than it is the message itself, Meltzer's background in music and visual arts comes in handy. His genius is his ability to detect and decode all kinds of encryptions from all kinds of media — decoding musical gestures and re-creating them as speech inflections and presenting them as one hilarious harmonious hell-raising. Yes:

> My chore and welcome to it: to monitor and register quasiaudible approval of the shadeless one's licks & such, to sit in stanch wait for him to spill (if poss.) his guts with a touch never hamfisted, no, nor especially heavyhanded, a line neither turgid nor glib, a demeanor not a jot cloyingly ebullient (or insouciant) (or morose) — an unflaggingly not unwinsome ivory persona I would like, and don't dislike, but neither do I 'specially truly like . . . so why am I here?
>
> I'm here because there is *no cover charge.*

Having been gladly jabbed in the eyes by Meltzer's unwashed insight for upward of 300 pages, I set *The Night (Alone)* aside with a sense of loss not unlike waking up alone for the first time after the end of a short, intense relationship. What happened — everything? again? already? The book is a drug; Little, Brown and Co. should seriously consider selling it in little plastic bags. What a gimmick. Kids'll love it.

God spent hundreds of years promoting His wonderful first Book and its popular Sequel only to run out of money and resort to late-night television to cover His expenses. (Personally, I think God comes off way too confident in His first Book, and the Sequel was, as I understand it, ghostwritten.) Hopefully, Little, Brown and Co. will help Meltzer avoid these kinds of marketing problems. His first couple of books weren't nearly as popular as God's; this one, though, should at least be competitive.

BOOKS

THE NIGHT (ALONE)
By RICHARD MELTZER
Little, Brown
304 pages;
$22.95 hardcover

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